

HISTORICAL INFLUENCES ON THE EARLY DEVELOPMENT OF THE EBC

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THE MAIN HISTORICAL INFLUENCES and inspiration of the early days of the EEC may be focussed on three points: the example of St. Augustine, the patronage of St. Benet Biscop, and the relevance or otherwise of the mainstream of Benedictine life in this country, from the 10th century to the 16th, to the origins and progress of the BBC. These three distinct but related themes did not appear simultaneously, nor was their influence uniform. Before examining them in detail we need, I believe, to consider some general principles of historiography and the importance in 17th century England and elsewhere of the cult of antiquity.

It is a commonplace that all historians try very hard to be objective, but they themselves are deeply influenced by personalities, forces and ideas which have helped to mould them. In secular history, for instance, there have been different views held of the significance of the Anglo-Saxons, found particularly in the 17th century, in regard to Law and Parliament. Some of them seem ludicrous today, such as Parliamentary democracy beginning in Anglo-Saxon times, King Harold II being a liberal constitutional monarch, King Alfred being the founder both of the Royal Navy and of Oxford University.

Now monastic, like secular, historians are not free from influences which form them, nor can they always rise superior to the limitations of their own time and country of origin. The 19th century Congregations, for example Solesmes, Beuron, St. Ottilien and others, all looked to history to justify their decisions on important issues concerning their way of life. Thus, Solesmes looked to the highly developed liturgical life of the High Middle Ages, and the Ottilians looked to St. Boniface's example to inspire and justify their missionary work. These are recent examples of justifying practice by an appeal to history. How should we consider the *Apostolatus Benedictinorum* or Serenus Cressy's *Church History* or the work of Benet Weldon in the light of monastic historiography, and in view of the example of their contemporaries?

In the 17th century, an appeal to history was very much in fashion. Catholic and Protestant theologians appealed not only to the Bible but also to the Fathers, especially those of the first four centuries, for texts to support and indeed prove their contentions. This was a European phenomenon and applies to the Centuriators of Magdeburg on one hand, and to St. Robert Bellarmine on the other. This interest in antiquity, not only for controversial reasons, was part of the Renaissance outlook, but it was controversy which provided the spur, the occasion, for research into the past.

In England, there was a notable antiquarian movement which led in the late 16th and early 17th centuries to the production of histories, legal treatises concerning Magna Carta, different opinions about the Anglo-Saxons and the Norman Conquest, and to a renewed interest in archaeology, in coins and seals. Above all, this movement led to a concern for historical documents, many of which had been dispersed from monastic libraries. Thus, Sir

Robert Cotton built up a fine collection of manuscripts, most of which are now in the British Library.

Cotton evidently enjoyed the pleasures of company and London society. He had the capacity to make friends and to charm women ... it seems Cotton always had visitors. There (at Cotton House) the Catholic theologian., Augustine Baker dropped in to find Camden sitting by the fireside; there Ben Jonson may have read poems and plays to Cotton and his other friends, Richard James and John Selden.¹

Cotton, Camden, Selden and another antiquarian, Henry Spelman, are four scholars whose signatures appear on p 202 of Clement Reyner's *Apostolatus Benedictinorum in Anglia*, approving the author's contention that Gregory and Augustine were Benedictines, and that the Benedictine institution continued in this country until Henry VIII. They also asserted that other monks of the order of St. Equitius, an Egyptian, existed in England before Augustine's time.

A number of scholars in this movement were concerned with religion in general. Matthew Parker, Archbishop of Canterbury, Bale and Ussher, also bishops, looked to antiquity to prove that the papacy counted for little or nothing in the history of the Church in England. Both the papacy and whole idea of monastic vows were anathema to radical Protestants, but there were others who thought better of the monasteries. They realised that Monasticism had indeed been immensely important in the life of medieval England as well as in the medieval Church itself. It was regarded with sympathetic interest by at least certain circles in the Church of England which regretted the dispersal of monastic libraries. This interest bore concrete fruit later in the publication of Dugdale's (and Dodsworth's) *Monasticon*, whose splendid collection of monastic documents has never been replaced. Dugdale, a Protestant Warwickshire squire, was sympathetic to the monasteries and recognised them for what they were: very influential centres of religious influence and economic importance in the countryside and in the towns. Nor did he (or the EEC scholars) forget that just half the cathedrals in medieval England were in the hands of the monks - this was a situation unique in Europe.

David Lunn in his scholarly study² has underlined that early BBC attitudes were inspired by the conviction of new life, of change from and lack of continuity with England's monastic past. But as time went on, BBC historians became more interested in and conscious of continuity. The idea of mission was bolstered by the appeal to the example of St. Augustine, and eventually in the EBC monasteries on the Continent, a monastic observance grew up which was austere, enclosed, liturgical and contemplative: one might consider it a reformed version of the late medieval English monastic model. The liturgical observance of St. Gregory's, Douai was admired by visiting reformed monks; the spirituality of the late Middle Ages was appreciated not least by Fr. Baker and his disciples.

The Westminster succession (about which I have nothing to add to other writers' work: I agree on the whole with Knowles' Gregorian statement, but do not wish to be controversial), whereby it was believed that continuity was re-established not only between Westminster and Dieulouard but also between the pre-Reformation English Congregation (if such existed) and the new EEC, is another example of an external stimulus not purely

¹ K. Sharpe, *Sir Robert Cotton 1586-1631* (Oxford, 1978), p.217-8

² D.Lunn, *The English Benedictines 1540-1688*,. London 1980

historical, working in favour of historical study. This was that legal and possibly financial advantages would come to the EBC if it were the authentic heir of the old abbeys, and if they were restored to their property. The Jesuits' claim in the pamphlet of Fr. Persons to the same property was understandably and rightly rejected. Note how this then new, lively Order, the modern up-to-date organised body for the changed religious world of the 17th century, which contained some of the liveliest minds and most effective apostles of the time, helped indirectly the Benedictines to rediscover their past. They could not beat the Jesuits at their own game - they did not have the centralised organisation, above all the specialist training and the semi-military idea of obedience to do so.

It is time, however, to look at the EBC scholars of the 17th century and to ask ourselves: was their appeal to antiquity entirely accurate? Have their findings been confirmed or denied by modern scholarship? Did they look to antiquity for materials to prove or justify their way of life or to provide rational justification both for their renewal of a monastic apostolate and for their claim to legal continuity with the pre-Reformation English Congregation?

Before analysing their contribution, I would like to pay tribute to their diligence. In the days before typewriters, telephones, microfilms and photostats, working in rather small communities with many commitments, the sheer bulk of some individuals' literary achievement is, to me, immensely impressive. So also was the work of the contemporary Maurists performed, it is not generally known, by comparatively few skilled scholars helped by others of much less ability.

Of the EBC scholars, Augustine Baker (died 1641), best known as a spiritual writer, was nevertheless, a leading spirit in this movement. Clement Reyner's *Apostolatus Benedictinorum in Anglia* (Douay 1626) is, in fact, largely Baker's work. Interweaving controversy with scholarship, the book contains the first printed edition of the Regularis Concordia and Lanfranc's *Monastic Constitutions*. Leander Jones (died 1635) was responsible for editions of the works of Trithemius and Vincent of Beauvais. Serenus Cressy (died 1674) was a convert clergyman, with experience of prebends in Ireland, who had become a canon of Windsor in 1642. He was reconciled with and at Rome in 1646 and professed as a monk at Douai in 1649. He published twelve works, amongst which were editions of the *Scale of Perfection* and of Mother Julian's *Revelations*. Cressy methodically digested the mystical teachings of Fr. Baker in his *Holy Wisdom (Sancta Sophia)*, published in 1657, and wrote *The Church History of Brittany* in 1668.

The *Apostolatus* was published under Reyner's name, but it was Baker who collected the material, and Leander Jones who polished it and translated it into Latin. Reyner himself contributed the preface and saw it through the press (D. Knowles in Levi Fox (ed.), *English Historical Scholarship in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* Oxford 1956 pp!21-22). Like other works of the time, in other fields of thought, it represents an appeal to antiquity to 'justify' decisions taken for other reasons; in this case, the resumption of the apostolate in England of the penal times by Benedictine monks. It is worth stressing what a remote appeal this was -to a precedent of 1000 years before, and one which had not been, properly speaking, part of the mainstream of English Benedictine life Ibr 500 years, that is, an active apostolate. Nor indeed were the new a£ostolates of the 17th century in the recently discovered countries monastic^ apostolates as such, for they were performed by

the Friars of the great mendicant Orders and, above all, by the Jesuits. The primary place and function of monks in the Church was seen to be that of prayer and penance within their Monasteries, restated with fresh vigour and extraordinary growth by the Carthusians in the 16th and 17th centuries. However, an appeal to distant antiquity had a charm and a distinction of its own, and it had clear contemporary parallels. The alleged antiquity of Oxford University going back to King Alfred, and even beyond, resembled medieval contests for antiquity between Westminster and Glastonbury, and was much in vogue, together with other obvious examples I have mentioned above.

APPLYING MODERN STANDARDS

How do the claims of these works measure up to present day historical thinking? Like its secular counterparts, the *Apostolatus* is too static in its presentation of its material, in this case medieval monasticism in England. Too little room is allowed for the interplay of other causes, for the development and decay of institutions. There is too little flexibility and too much attribution to single causes. One example of this is the role of St. Augustine in the conversion of England. Certainly it was important, certainly Canterbury and the Roman influence which lay behind it became dominant in the A.S. Church. But this happened long after Augustine's time, and Canterbury was by no means the only influence at work. All historians nowadays attribute the conversion of A.S. England to the work of missionaries and monasteries which had origins and influence from places as diverse as Rome, Ireland and Gaul.

Moreover, present day thinking on the Benedictinism of S.S. Gregory and Augustine is closer to the opinion of Baronius than that of the *Apostolatus*, Knowles³ admits that Gregory was neither a 'Benedictine nor a propagator of Benedictine monasticism. He did however greatly admire St. Benedict and his Rule, but his spiritual teaching is derived from Augustine and Cassian, is not a development of, or a commentary on the Rule.' Consequently Augustine of Canterbury was not properly a Benedictine, indeed in 590 no such title existed. There was however nothing 'unBenedictine' in Augustine's monastic life, but there is no firm early evidence that he introduced the Rule into England.

At this time of course, there were no parishes in England. The population was tiny (only one and three quarter millions in the time of Domesday Book); the organisation of the Church rudimentary and based on the court and the bishop. Monasteries were however important from early times for consolidating the faith and providing effective centres of Christian life in town and country. Most of Augustine's monks presumably lived a largely cloistered life in the monastery of SS. Peter and Paul, Canterbury, while a few of them were permanently attached to Augustine's episcopal household at the cathedral. This at least seems to be the thought of St. Gregory when he deals with such a problem in his correspondence. But in these early days of the so-called 'mixed rules' there was much flexibility in the details, even important ones.

Augustine died only about 7 years after reaching England. The conversion of the most important and civilized of the Anglo-Saxon courts, followed up by mass-baptisms in the rivers of Kent, the foundation of three dioceses and at least one monastery were all that

³ M.D.Knowles, *The Monastic Order in England*, 2nd ed. pp.750-51.

could be expected from one man in so short a time. It was his achievement to establish a small bridgehead in S.E. England: Much remained undone: others would reap where he had sown.

These others were the Italian Birinus in Essex, the Burgundian Felix in East Anglia, the Irishman Aidan from Iona in Northumbria. Aidan founded monasteries in Northumbria, especially at Lindisfarne, which became an important centre of monasticism and evangelisation. This development seems to have been independent of the *Rule* of St. Benedict, nor is it certain that Augustine brought a copy of it with him to England. But it is possible that he did. This should not cause us undue concern: the Benedictine monopoly which developed partly in the eighth and partly in the tenth century was not a reality in the seventh. St. Benedict himself moreover was an important and late representative of a monastic tradition already in existence for some centuries: his very probable dependence on the *Rule of the Master* makes this even clearer than before.

There is no certain evidence for the use of the Rule of St. Benedict in England before about 660, when it was introduced into Northumbria by Wilfrid. Note however that his disciple and biographer Eddius says 'Into Northumbria: he neither affirms nor denies that it existed already elsewhere in England. If Baronius was more in the right than the authors of the *Apostolatus* about the Benedictinism of Gregory and Augustine, he seems to have led them astray about the place of St. Benedict Biscop, chosen as patron of the E.B.C.

This was very important, but important in a different way from that indicated, for example, by Dom Benet 'Eldon. According to this, author Baronius called him founder because he established several excellent reformations, regulated with more exactness the Divine Service, increased the solemnities and gravity of singing and ceremonies of the choir and added the last hand towards the absolute perfection of that order of which he was a member, then a reformer and improver, and since a patron and protector. This sounds more like the eulogy of a 13-14th century abbot than one of the seventh, but he continues: 'he was raised up by Almighty God to recover monastic discipline which by succession of time and irruptions of pagans not yet converted was extremely decayed and almost extinguished'. Like some others before him, he was misled into thinking that there was a Congregation of English Benedictines at that date (supposedly founded by Augustine and reformed by Benedict Bishop). The reality was different and, as in Augustine's case, more interesting.

The situation of the Church in Anglo-Saxon England in the late 660's was critical. The Synod of Whitby (663), primarily but not exclusively a Northumbrian concern, had opted for Roman against Irish tradition. One of the principal subjects in which there had been divergence was in the date of celebrating Easter. St. Wilfrid, who introduced the *Rule* into Northumbria, was the principal, and very effective spokesman for the Roman side. After the Synod had opted for universalism against a provincial parochialism, a new crisis followed when most of the bishops in England died of the plague. The appointment by the pope of Theodore of Canterbury, neither an Italian, a Frenchman, nor Irishman but a Greek brought new life to monasticism. Then came three other notable monks, Adrian the African, Benedict Biscop and Wilfrid, both Northumbrians, both well travelled men who had spent years in France or Italy, both well acquainted with the *Rule* of St. Benedict, which they introduced into their respective monasteries. In none of these however was the Rule of St.

Benedict the unique guide. However, by the death of Biscop it had, I believe, come into a dominant position at Wearmouth and Jarrow. This is surely the sense of Biscop's insistence on the election of his successor according to the *Rule*. That implied setting aside all family rights to the monastery, a kind of dispossession of his own brother in a society still largely held together by kinship, where the Germanic concept of privately owned churches and monasteries was still paramount. Privately owned churches indeed would be for some time the rule rather than the exception; but a king, a bishop, a monastic founder as well as a lord of the manor or other lay magnate could and did own churches and indeed monasteries. We can glimpse the abuses of this system beginning in the early 8th century with the references to false monasteries in Bede's Letter to Egbert.

Benedict Biscop's title to fame as founder or reformer of a supposed English Congregation is unhistorical and anachronistic, but his real greatness lay in other directions. Both as an importer of books, indirectly from Cassiodorus' monastery of Vivarium and as a patron and instigator of important developments in architecture, mural painting and glass making, as a monastic founder who consciously and deliberately increased Roman and papal influence both in his monastery and outside it, as the abbot who received Bede into the monastery as a boy and who, with his successor Ceolfrith, made the formation and achievement of Bede possible, he well deserves to be remembered with veneration and gratitude. He founded a twin monastery in two places, not a congregation. Interestingly, if we are to look for a precursor of a monastic congregation in the 7-8th centuries, we should look rather to Wilfrid than to Biscop. Wilfrid after all, founded monasteries in Northumbria, Mercia and Sussex, about ten in all, some abbots and abbesses, concerned about the basic problem of continuity of monastic life in the then state of society, made over their lands to him for protection, and on his deathbed he bequeathed a quarter of his considerable wealth to their having the wherewithal to make friends with Kings and bishops. Once again, it was his concern for the future of his monasteries, in danger not only of war and pillage but also of the more insidious and less avoidable secularization by lay owners that prompted this action.

The editors of the *Apostolatus* were sufficiently interested in the *Regularis Concordia* and Lanfranc's *Monastic Constitutions* to print both these important documents for the first time. These, as well as the extracts from the acts of the late medieval general chapters, held the field until modern times; these texts are of more permanent value to historical scholarship than a good deal of the argumentation concerning St. Augustine and the supposed early existence of an English monastic congregation. In both the *Regularis Concordia* and Lanfranc's *Constitutions* is clear the repeated and beneficial influence of continental monasticism on England; this probably, is more evident to historians of to-day, when the European perspective of both Anglo-Saxon and Anglo-Norman England is stressed than it was to those of the 17th century. And this influence was to a large extent the influence of Cluny, through Fleury in the revival of Dunstan and Ethelwold, through the actual text of Lanfranc in the 11th century. It has indeed been a surprising discovery of modern scholars to find the clear and important influence of Cluny rather than Bec in Lanfranc's *Constitutions*. The way of life in English monasteries of the 10th and 11th centuries was substantially the same as that of Cluny, but there was no juridical dependence on that Great Burgundian abbey. However neither this document nor the *Reg. Concordia* had

properly speaking the force of law requiring uniformity from all houses. The reality was that a series of independent monasteries with individual traditions followed their own customs within a common framework. In the 11th century the advent of vigorous Norman abbots appointed by William I and Lanfranc acted as a cohesive force in the direction of sound observance, efficient government and administration, and deeper and more expansive learning.

So successful was this renewal that the number of monks and nuns increased by about 100 percent within less than thirty years. The way of life for English and continental Black Benedictines, remained basically unchanged until the Reformation.

The care of half the cathedrals in the country, but not the care of parishes, was part of their recognized work for the Church. This was an arrangement unique in Christendom. The cathedral liturgy was scarcely different from that of a large abbey, nor was the furnishing of the respective churches. Each was really two churches in one, divided by a rood-screen with a subsidiary altar (or two) to the west of the screen. In each the sanctuary and the choir were by far the most important part: in each probably would be the shrine of a local saint or saints, attracting crowds of men and women to be healed After the Reformation the *Opus Dei* continues to be performed in the same monastic building but in a somewhat different way by the Anglican cathedral choirs of Canterbury, Winchester, Durham and elsewhere.

The authors of the *Apostolatus* were on much firmer ground in seeing an English Monastic Congregation in the later Middle Ages. This had arisen following the fourth Lateran Council of 1215 (as important for the medieval Church as Vatican II is for us) and the great success of the Cistercians. This centralised reform depended in part for its reputation on the juridical innovation of genius which it included: that of a mother house with daughter houses, visited regularly by the founding abbot or his successor. Innocent III insisted on the Black Benedictines adopting a system of visitation and General Chapter in imitation of the Cistercians. This was done in England, perhaps more effectively than elsewhere. But there was little effect in practice on the autonomy of each house beyond the regulation of the diet and the establishment of houses of study at Oxford. Reform came either through papal pressure or through royal pressure. But it could and did come also through self-examination. In all these cases the visitation and the general chapter were a useful influence, but the the whole congregation amounted to no more than a loose federation.

Always the Benedictines were less centralised than the Cistercians, the Friars and the Jesuits; but inevitably, to meet the needs of the times and the current thinking of some of the best minds in the Church, their government in the 16-17th centuries was deeply influenced by those of other Orders. In order to have reform, it was believed, you had to have some form of centralisation. All the reformed Benedictine congregations, Cassinese, Maurist, Vannist adopted this to some degree just as they adopted Counter-Reformation spirituality to some degree. It must be no surprise that the early years of the EBC were marked by similar developments, made inevitable by the missionary impulse, by the operation of penal laws in England, and by the generally accepted views of the time. It is interesting and very laudable that they devoted so much of their time and energy to studying Benedictine origins and developments in this country.

The English Benedictine appeal to history in the 17th century had both strong and weak features. Its strong feature was the realisation that monks and nuns who follow the Rule of St. Benedict in this country are the heirs of a long and fine tradition. In the 20th century, as in the 17th, this is a legitimate cause for pride, but also for discriminating judgement concerning both particular movements and, if necessary, individuals in this long history. Without this perspective, monks and nuns are very much the poorer. On the other hand, we have Knowles's opinion that the *Apostolatus* is an instance of a common phenomenon: a piece of ephemeral controversy growing into a work of critical scholarship. The printing of original documents was the most valuable element of the book in the long term. But in the end a priori convictions of what history will prove do not provide the best approach to historical reality. Patient, objective sifting of the evidence is the best corrective to over-simplification.